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Excitement builds as PGA Tour returns to Asheville for the Biltmore Championship. Is the city ready?

Tiana Kennell Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

Around 5 a.m. each morning, Steve Shand, course superintendent at The Cliffs at Walnut Cove, and his crew set out to survey the golf course to ensure it's up to par for members of the residential Arden golf community. This month, the pressure is higher as the private facility prepares to host the PGA Tour's professional golf competition, the Biltmore Championship Asheville, Sept. 17-20. ● "It's constantly monitoring it all day, especially in the heat, seeing how the course reacts with the heat. It helps us schedule afternoon assignments and gives us an idea of what we want to accomplish the next day," Shand said. ● Shand said The Cliffs at Walnut Cove's course is routinely maintained in tournament-ready condition, with no major upgrades needed.

"The biggest thing that we're doing leading up to the event is growing our rough a little longer, and that's going to add some challenges for the players if they get out of position," Shand said.

The Biltmore Championship Asheville, co-sponsored by Explore Asheville and Biltmore, is part of the PGA Tour's FedEx Fall Series. Professional men's golfers, starting with 132 players on the first day, will compete for the custom-made gold-and-silver trophy and a share of the $5 million purse; points will determine which players secure PGA TOUR status and earn their place for the season ahead.

The Championship Trophy was designed by Aubrey Vanderbilt Cecil Baliles, great-great-granddaughter of George and Edith Vanderbilt of the famed Biltmore Estate, and created in partnership with her local jewelry company, Avermore, Biltmore, Explore Asheville and Marthaler Jewelers.

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A member of the course maintenance team clears debris near a bunker at The Cliffs at Walnut Cove as preparations continue for the Biltmore Championship in Arden.
PHOTOS BY JOSH BELL/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

TOP: Workers assemble tournament infrastructure at The Cliffs at Walnut Cove ahead of the Biltmore Championship in Arden.

Saudis temporarily shut down vital oil pipeline

Mohammed Ghobari, Yasmine Ghania and Eman Abouhassira
REUTERS

DUBAI – Saudi Arabia has shut down its East-West pipeline after the vital oil conduit came under aerial attack in the widening Middle East war, threatening to send energy prices even higher.

The world's largest crude oil exporter temporarily closed the pipeline after a drone attack that both Baghdad and Riyadh said had originated in Iraq, where Iranian-backed militias operate. Iraq dismissed a military commander on Sept. 12 in response to the attack.

The 745-mile pipeline running across the Arabian Peninsula had helped Saudi Arabia to bypass a shipping logjam in the Strait of Hormuz, where tanker traffic has slowed to a trickle due to the six-month war between the United States

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Human, bear coexistence a challenge in Smokies

Devarrick Turner
Knoxville News Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

KNOXVILLE, TN – You don't need to be in Great Smoky Mountains National Park to spot a bear, especially lately. They're trotting around parking lots in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, ripping sunroof windows off cars and even getting locked in motel bathrooms.

The wild scenes can make for an exciting sight and an easy viral clip on TikTok or Facebook. But it's much less fun in person when a bear gets too close.

The national park has reported instances this year of bears approaching and chasing people, including one in which a bear bit a person who had entered a closed area. The increased bear activity and encounters have prompted temporary closures of trails, shelters and areas of the park.

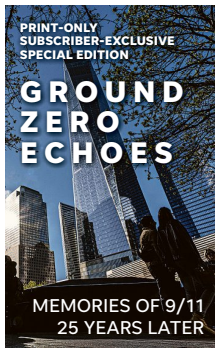
"Don't get me wrong, (the Smokies region has) a lot of bears," Greg Grieco, executive director of Appalachian Bear Rescue, told Knox News. "But if you were to ask the bears, I think they'd tell you, 'Man, someone's got to do something about all these people.'"

And that's the crux of one of the biggest conundrums in the Smokies.

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Millions of people visit the Smokies every year for the mountain views, unique attractions and, yes, bears. But as tourism and development continue to grow, people and bears are increasingly sharing the same space. ANGELINA ALCANTAR/ KNOXVILLE NEWS SENTINEL



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PGA Tour

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It's the inaugural year of Biltmore Championship Asheville, with a four-year contract, and the first time in 84 years the PGA Tour event will be contested in the Asheville area. Explore Asheville signed a $2.4 million four-year agreement through 2029 for the event, making it the seventh Tour event in the city.

Nathan Goldsnider, event director for the PGA Tour and Biltmore Championship Asheville, said The Cliffs at Walnut Cove was an ideal host, requiring little preparation to host the thousands of players and attendees over the four-day tournament — an event he said is not to be missed.

"The intensity in the air is palpable. It's exciting," Goldsnider said. "At the end of the day, this is a professional golf tournament. It's these guys' job. They're playing for serious money, they're playing for status, and there's a lot on the line."



A member of the course maintenance team mows near a bunker at The Cliffs at Walnut Cove as the course is prepared for the Biltmore Championship in Arden. JOSH BELL/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

Biltmore Championship Asheville comes to The Cliffs at Walnut Cove

The Cliffs at Walnut Cove is a gated residential golfing community featuring million-dollar homes.

Jason Zeller, general manager at The Cliffs at Walnut Cove, said its internal team will lead on-site hospitality, and its members will be integral in those efforts.

"A year-one event, you have a lot of unknowns, but what was really special was to see how quickly the volunteer interest filled on every level," Zeller said. "There are over 1,000 volunteers to pull off this size, and our membership support of that was first and fast."

More than 1,100 volunteers are registered to pitch in throughout the tournament, including residents and members of The Cliffs at Walnut Cove.

Shand's course maintenance crew has 23 staff members, and more than 44 expert volunteers are scheduled to assist the crew each day of the event.

Shand, who has worked at the facility for 14 years and occasionally at PGA events in Charlotte and Augusta, Georgia, said he and the Arden golfing community were honored and proud to host the event in their own backyard.

As golf fans convene in the Blue Ridge Mountains for the high-stakes event, behind-the-scenes operations continue to ensure it's a hit.

"It's such a beautiful space and an awesome golf course. It's going to be extremely challenging for the players," Shand said. "The membership is wonderful here, and excited to welcome some of the best players in the world to take a swing at Walnut Cove."

Jack Nicklaus, a retired professional golfer, designed the more than 23,000-square-foot venue and 71-par course, which opened in 2005.

The rough — or the grassy area around the fairways — is being grown to be nearly 6 inches tall, which Shand said is at least 3.5 times taller than usual at the facility for regular golf play.

Grass varieties can also affect difficulty: Bentgrass on the fairways and tees, Bent/Poa on the greens, and Kentucky Bluegrass in the rough. Shand said some players may have an advantage if they are more used to these surfaces than others.

Factors such as record-high temperatures, rainfall, drought, and humidity can affect the course's preparation and challenge the maintenance team. Some meddlesome wildlife neighbors add to the unpredictability.

The Cliffs at Walnut Cove's placement in Western North Carolina and near the Blue Ridge Parkway means visits by black bears, eagles, hawks, osprey, deer and others. Shand said the bear neighbors have been known to play with flag sticks and sneak off into the woods with them.

"One thing about weather: we can't control it. The weather will always throw us the biggest challenges. The summer has been excessively hot and wet," Shand said. "My team is doing a great job keeping up with the conditions of the course and making sure we're ready to go when the balls are in the air on the 17th."

'Our success is Asheville's success'

Goldsnider said that while Hurricane Helene, which arrived in WNC as a tropical storm in the fall of 2024, was not the driving factor for the PGA Tour to come to the region, it is intended to support the ongoing recovery and rebuilding efforts, much like The Sentry golf tournament was to boost the local economy and be an aid to the community following the wildfires in Maui, Hawaii.

Goldsnider said conversations about hosting the PGA Tour began before the historic natural disaster and resumed afterward.

Biltmore Championship Asheville is expected to generate $15-30 million in economic impact over the four-year contract through 2029, according to Explore Asheville. More than 10,000 people are expected to attend daily, with more than 2,000 out-of-state visitors, as of late August.

Nonprofit giving includes four $10,000 grants to local nonprofits, as part of the community grant program. Nearly 50 nonprofits registered for its Birdies for Charities program, which invites local nonprofits to raise funds and awareness through its online platform, with 100% of donations going directly back to participating organizations.

On Sept. 14, PGA Tour and the youth development organization First Tee WNC will host a private youth clinic event that Goldsnider said can build excitement around golf and inspire people to return to the game or play for the first time.

"Our success is Asheville's success. We want the Asheville community and Western North Carolina to be highlighted," Goldsnider said. "It's a beautiful part of this country that has been through a lot in the last couple of years, but we know they're ready to open their doors. We want this to be a tremendous event for everybody, whether you attend the event or not."

What to know before you go

Goldsnider said the PGA Tour is for everyone, from golf fans to novices, and designed to be accessible.

"We're in the business of creating memorable experiences, and we want

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PGA Tour

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everybody who comes to the Biltmore Championship Asheville to leave the event and property like, 'Oh my gosh, that was so cool. We just got to see the best players in the world play golf,'" Goldsnider said.

Tickets for the Biltmore Championship Asheville begin at $67.41 to $104.56 for general admission grounds access. A ticketed adult for grounds can bring up to two youth ages 15 and under for free admission.

Complimentary grounds tickets are available to active-duty service members and one dependent for Sept. 17-20, while supplies last. Veterans, reserve, National Guard members and first responders may purchase discounted tickets, too.

Goldsnider recommended that attendees wear comfortable shoes suitable for the outdoors, standing, and walking, and bring a hat and a small container of sunscreen to apply throughout the day. A list of prohibited items and guidelines is on the website at pgatour.com.

The PGA Tour app lets fans follow the action, check tee times, and see the latest scores and standings.

Etiquette tips to follow include being mindful not to clap, cheer or talk when players are hitting and approaching the golf balls, he said.

Goldsnider said that, unlike many other traditional sporting events, the Biltmore Championship Asheville will be laid-back, encouraging attendees to move through all 18 holes and explore off-course areas and activities, such as the hospitality tents, kids' zone, local food partners' booths and merchandise shops.

"Your favorite players are all over the golf course, and you're not in a confined seat," Goldsnider said. "You can explore the property, go find a different spot on the 3rd green, then go find the perfect spot on the 16th tee and do it the way you want. It's a largely immersive experience that we're excited to showcase to the Asheville community."

As the first round approaches and Shand prepares to welcome locals and visitors to the Cliffs at Walnut Cove, he said he sees the Biltmore Championship Asheville as a way to remind the world to support Asheville during the years-long post-Helene recovery and to showcase its beauty and progress.

"There's still work to be done. Asheville's super resilient, but keeping Asheville in the news, in the media, and in sports, and highlighting how awesome it is, is important," Shand said. "I'm proud of my team that we can be a part of bringing that to Asheville."

Tiana Kennell is the food and dining reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Co., covering the food and beverage industry, including the James Beard Awards, Michelin Awards, restaurant openings, closings and other hospitality industry news and events. Tips, comments, questions? Email tkennell@citizentimes.com or follow @PrincessOfPage on Instagram. Sign up for AVL Bites and Brews, our weekly food and drink newsletter here.

By the numbers

$2.4 million agreement through 2029 for the event, making it the seventh Tour event in the city.

$5 million purse the Biltmore Championship Asheville players will compete to win.

48 hospitality spaces to accommodate demand (originally 20 intended).

21,500 square feet of hospitality and event infrastructure constructed.23 staff members on the course maintenance crew.

44+ volunteers, daily, assisting with course maintenance.

84 years since the last PGA Tour was hosted in Asheville. In the early 1920s, Asheville's Land of the Sky Open was first contested.

1939 to 1942 the Asheville Open was an official Tour tournament.

1,100+ volunteers signed up for the event, ages 13-87 and representing 27 states, with more than 70% living in North Carolina and more than 50% from Buncombe County.

Biltmore Championship Asheville

Where: The Cliffs at Walnut Cove, Arden.

When: Sept. 17-20.

Info: Tickets are available at biltmorechampionship.com/tickets.